Research Practice Essay

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13 November 2020

How do artists and filmmakers seek to represent the human connection to landscape in their work, and in what ways do these artworks evoke a natural sublime?

Introduction

The aim of this research essay is to explore ways in which humans relate to the environment, specifically natural landscapes. It will discuss traditional dualistic Western notions of humankind's relationship to nature and contrast this with indigenous perspectives. It will then argue that the instinctive pull we feel towards natural landscapes is analogous to our encounters with the sublime—something we might experience both in works of art and in nature. Finally the essay will examine the work of artists and filmmakers, noting some of the distinctive ways these practitioners explore the natural environment, and in doing so, reflect back to us our collective stories and psychological states.

Western Disengagement with Landscape

Living in a Western society with notions of nature as separate from ourselves has led to a disengagement with our environment and a weakening of ties to the landscape. This nature–culture divide can be traced back to Cartesian Dualism, Rene Descartes' 17th century philosophy of outlining a distinction between the thinking mind (subjective and immeasurable) and the body (objective, measurable and composed of matter). This dualistic notion has its roots in the mechanical philosophy of the renaissance; the idea that nature operates in a mechanistic, mathematical way. During this time Johannes Kepler used the metaphor of a clock to explain the workings of the natural world, and Galileo Galilei made a distinction between that which is objective and measurable, and human belief and opinion. This worldview eventually "cemented the philosophical separation of subject (the human mind) from 'objects' external to the human mind, including 'nature'... [and has] dominated Western attitudes towards 'nature'" ever since (Roberts, 2012, p.35).

And while Western society has done little to repair these weakened ties, instead developing an exploitative relationship with our environment, Graham Harvey (2017) points out that "there are a number of vital alternatives to the modernist Western culture that uses and exploits other persons" (p. xvii) (here Harvey refers to all sentient and 'non-sentient' beings—trees, rivers, mountain ranges, etc—as 'persons'). In fact, the Western nature–culture divide is alien to many indigenous worldviews and Roberts (2012) argues that there is no longer a place for it in contemporary society (p. 34).

Western society seeks to commodify, manicure and control nature. By setting aside zones in which to observe the natural world as separate from ourselves (gardens, parks, zoos), and by living a large part of our lives in man-made environments, alienated from the source of our food, we have not only attempted to assert our perceived dominance over the natural world but we have deemed it as 'other', daily reinforcing the dualistic nature–culture divide that's become a defining aspect of Western culture. David Abram (2017) describes the ways in which we are disengaged with the animate environment:

> *To be sure, our obliviousness to nonhuman nature is today held in place by ways of speaking that simply deny intelligence to other species and to nature in general, as well as by the very structures of our civilized existence–by the incessant drone of motors that shut out the voices of birds and of the winds; by electric lights that eclipse not only the stars but the night itself; by air "conditioners" that hide the seasons; by offices, automobiles, and shopping malls that finally obviate any need to step outside the purely human world at all… "Nature", it would seem, has become simply a stock of "resources" for human civilization, and so we can hardly be surprised that our civilized eyes and ears are somewhat oblivious to the existence of perspectives that are not human at all* (p. 28)

In contrast to this divide are the many indigenous worldviews whereby humans exist in a reciprocal relationship with the whole of their environment, where the landscape is "spatially and perceptually undivided [and] there exists no 'other' or 'nature'" (Roberts, 2010, p. 36). These cultures believe that "the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human… life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey, 2017, p. xvii)

Writing about the pre-colonial Māori worldview, Roberts (2012) notes that through the genealogical tradition of whakapapa, Māori held beliefs that all things were sentient and related, illustrating a worldview with no distinction between nature and culture (p. 45). These whakapapa are not only origin stories (the explanation of how biological, non-biological and celestial beings came into existence), but provide a taxonomic framework that Māori use to understand their environment and all it contains (p. 41). In the Māori world, everything, both visible and invisible, is intertwined and connected.

Roberts (2012) also notes an absence of the nature–culture divide among tribes of Papua New Guinea, writing that anthropologists have found that within these tribes, human activity is conducted within a spatially and perceptually undivided landscape where the entire world is considered cultural and animate; the othering of nature does not exist (p. 36).

Some Western philosophers and ecologists have moved away from the pervasive Western dualistic worldview, and instead have posited that humans are but one part of a larger, connected whole (Roberts, 2012, p. 35). Might we consider there to be an elemental connection between humans and the landscape that is fundamental to our existence, and that our blindness to this bond in Western society has led to a yearning to transcend our mechanistic worldview, to be at one with something greater than our individual selves? Perhaps we should see ourselves not as objective observers after all, but participants in a "complex self-regulating web or a living organism in which humans are but one integrated component of the whole" (Roberts, 2012, p. 35). Or, as Abram (2017) puts it "at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are *all* animists" (p. 57).

The Natural Sublime

One way we might seek to strengthen ties to the land and build a reciprocal relationship with the environment is through experience of the sublime.

The concept of sublimity can be described as an all-encompassing sensation of wonder and awe in contemplation of that which leaves us utterly transformed. We might find ourselves in such a state of awe when contemplating a powerful scene or event in nature, viewing an immense artwork that captivates the senses, or considering the power and reach of modern day technology. Phenomena that present a destabilising excess or leave us reaching to comprehend that which is incomprehensible, as if we are bearing witness to a higher power that sits outside of the human mind, may be considered sublime.

For the past four centuries, notions of the sublime have evolved as thinkers and writers have explored the topic. So too have artists explored and developed the concept, seeking to capture sublimity in their work by depicting the unpresentable and shepherding the viewer towards a transcendental experience. Artists working towards this end are at times seeking to recreate or represent natural phenomena that leave us with a dizzying sense of awe, succumbing to

unconditional power and accepting our environment's ultimate dominance over our lives (Morley, 2010a, p. 18).

Philosopher Alain De Botton (2013) explains that sublime artworks "make us aware of our insignificance, exciting a pleasing terror and a sense of how petty man's disasters are in comparison with the ways of eternity, leaving us a little readier to bow to the incomprehensible tragedies that every life entails" (p. 30). Such art asks us to stare into the void, look past trivial concerns of the everyday, and to contemplate that which is in excess of human understanding.

While some artworks may be considered sublime in their own right, many simply pictorialise natural scenes that evoke sublime sensations in and of themselves. These works often examine human existence in the landscapes we inhabit, how we connect to these landscapes, our sense of place and our yearning to be a part of something beyond ourselves.

The following sections will explore the art of contemporary photographers working within the field of landscape photography. Where in centuries past, the pictorialisation of landscape was solely the domain of painting (landscape painters who evoked notions of sublime in their work include Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W Turner), the advent of photography "released painting from certain obligations so that it might do things it had not done before" (Gilbert-Rolfe, 1999, p. 19). During the 20th century painters began to move beyond realistic representations of the sublime in nature and towards abstraction, and as such photography became a dominant artistic medium in which to document awe-inspiring, sublime scenes of nature.

Along with contemporary photographers, this essay will touch on Colin McCahon, a landscape artist of great significance in New Zealand, before analysing the work of two filmmakers, Vincent Ward and Andrei Tarkovsky, whose films address human relationships with landscape.

The following examples seek to address the notion that art, and the sublime, might provide us an opportunity to return to "the realm of subjective experience, not to explain [the landscape] but to simply pay attention to its rhythms and textures, not to capture or control it but simply to become familiar with its diverse modes of appearance" (Abram, 2017, p. 35).

Capturing the Sublime Transcendence of Landscape

Richard Misrach is an American photographer who, in the 1970s, helped to popularise the use of large format, colour imagery in a gallery setting. Misrach is perhaps best known for his series *Desert Cantos,* a body of work featuring haunting images that, while devoid of human figures, manage to explore the human relationship to the American desertscape. His work has been described as “sublimely beautiful [but] imbued with disquieting undercurrents”. His photography has also focused on the destruction humanity has unleashed on the environment, a fact that is “made all the more disturbing by the unabashed allure of his images” (Pollock, 2013, para. 1).

Figure 1

Unnamed Playa (Exposure by Moonlight)

Note: Misrach, R. (1994). Unnamed Playa (Exposure by Moonlight) [Pigment print]. https://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/desert-cantos

In a departure from his work dealing with environmental tragedy, in a recent series of large-scale photographs Misrach explores the calm sublimity of the boundless ocean and human connection to it. The figures in these immense artworks are tiny, surrounded by, and seemingly at one with an endless blue. While in this sense the photographs portray a harmonious and reciprocal relationship between humankind and the environment, they also evoke a spectacle of nature as an incomprehensible void. As Misrach states, the work is "about our relationship to the bigger sublime picture of things" (as cited in Fletcher, 2008, para. 6).

Figure 2

Untitled (#857-02)

Note: Misrach, R. (2002). Untitled (#857-02) [Pigment print]. https://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/on-the-beach

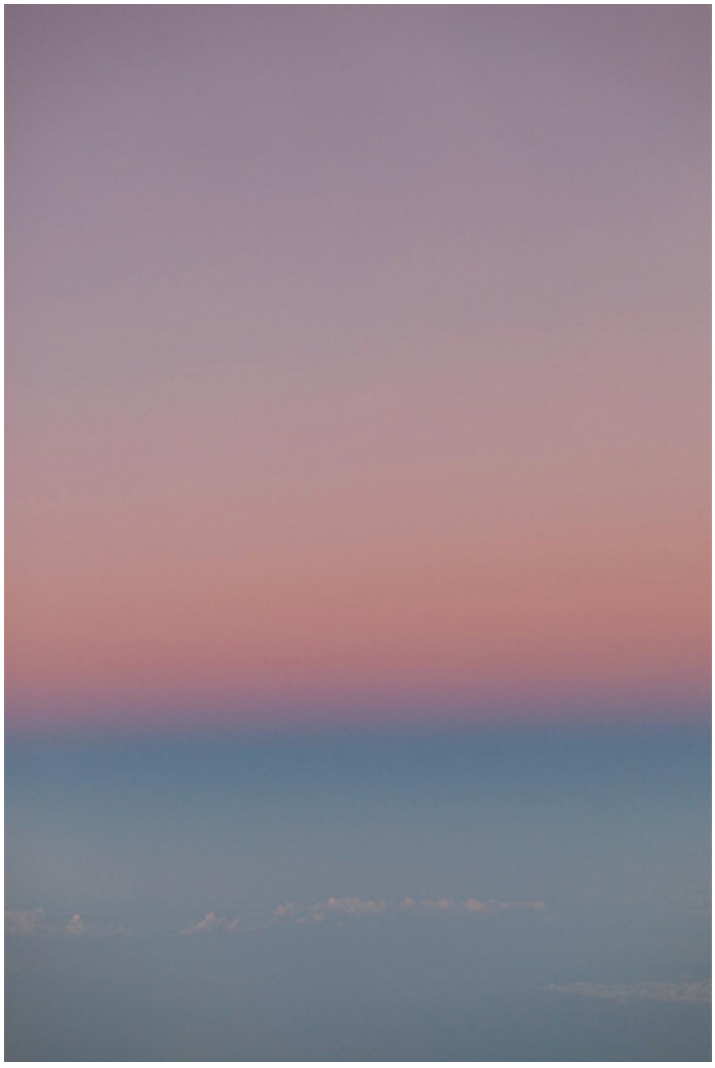
Commenting further, Misrach explains that “If you look back over the last 40 years, I swing from work that is about the environment and is political to work that’s really about my passion for the

medium. As I get older I am more comfortable with metaphysical questions" (cited in Pollock, 2013, para. 4).

Another photographer utilising spatial immensity in his imagery of the natural world is German born artist Wolfgang Tillmans. In his *Vertical Landscape* series, Tillmans engages with space in a way that captures the sublime beauty of the environments he is photographing, in large-scale portrait prints produced from 1995-2016.

Figure 3

Tag/Nacht II (Day/Night II)



Note: Tillmans, W. (2010). Tag/Nacht II (Day/Night II) [Ink-jet print]
https://www.artforum.com/print/previews/201601/wolfgang-tillmans-on-the-verge-of-visibility-56800

Many of these images, taken at various locations over a number of years, and at different times of day and night, display the immensity of their locations, and by focusing on the points in which earth meets sea, sea meets sky and sky meets clouds, Tillmans is conveying the interconnected web of being that all things exist within. “The exquisite abstractions created from the impact of light in the photographic process itself” allude to a universality that for Tillmans “is not only visual, social, economic and political, it is organic, bodily, and phenomenal” (Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, 2016, para. 5). His expansive, unedited photographs of the environment allow us to marvel at the complex reality in which we are but just one aspect, standing in awe of that which, like the sky pictured above, is intangible, ungraspable, but ultimately deeply connected to each of us.

Representing the Impact of Cultural Forces on Landscape

Through his large-format, predominately black and white photographs, New Zealand artist Mark Adams seeks to convey the cultural impact embodied in the landscapes of significant sites across Aotearoa.

His exhibition *Cook's Sites* is concerned with two of the locations visited by Captain James Cook in the late 18th century, spaces that “are loaded with bicultural significance” (Christchurch Art Gallery, 2014, para. 2). Representative of early meetings between Māori and the colonial British Empire, in these haunting images the land appears alive with stories played out through a sometimes tense history, where two cultures with opposing worldviews came face to face.

Figure 4

10.8.1988 Indian Island, after William Hodges' "View in Dusky Bay"

Note: Adams, M. (1988). 10.8.1988 Indian Island, after William Hodges' "View in Dusky Bay" (detail) [Silver bromide fibre based prints]. https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/exhibitions/mark-adams-cooks-sites

Significantly, Captain Cook represents the dualistic nature–culture worldview that saw land, and the indiginous communities living in reciprocity with it, as ‘other’, something to be colonised and commodified. In contrast, Adams’ photographs present the land as something alive with the history it holds, something to be engaged with and revered.

Sugimoto’s Seascapes

Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto has travelled the world for over 30 years meticulously capturing large format black & white photographs of seascapes where the water and sky are set in a perfect ratio to one another.

In each work from the series, the ocean is a vast swell of infinite emptiness demarcated by a blurred horizon line that leads to a flat, grey, calming sky. Sugimoto (n.d) connects these images to the advent of life on earth and the root of our very existence: “The beginnings of life are shrouded in myth: Let there [be] water and air. Living phenomena spontaneously generated from water and air in the presence of light”, he goes on to note the sensual affect large bodies of water can have on our psyches, explaining his own connection to the ocean: “every time I view the sea, I feel a calming sense of security, as if visiting my ancestral home; I embark on a voyage of seeing” (para. 1).

These tranquil, minimal prints make use of a natural scape to present a void for the viewer to stare into, amplifying perceptual awareness of oneself, perhaps not as a dominant other but instead a humbled participant. The inherent absence conveys a sense of timelessness, and were it not for the titles clearly stating the setting of each photograph, the water and air portrayed could be anywhere. Time and specificity do not matter in these photographs, instead, we are faced with the vastness of the ocean, letting it envelop our senses, and all at once we might feel a serene oneness with the natural world alongside a contrasting sense of insignificance and awe in her presence.

Figure 5

Lake Superior

Note: Sugimoto, H. (2003). Lake Superior [Gelatin Silver Print]. https://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/seascapes

As de Botton (2013) writes, Sugimoto's work "draws us away from ourselves; we forget our immediate hopes and preoccupations as we give ourselves over to contemplation of the hazy horizon and the even, pure tones of the watery sky" (p. 148).

A number of critics have called attention to the inherent sublimity in Sugimoto's *Seascapes* series with Morley (2010b) describing the artworks as taking us to a point in which we cannot comprehend the scene in front of us—the photographs present "a sense of void—of being on a borderline or edge where we can no longer codify experience" (para. 10).

McCahon's Connection to the Landscape of New Zealand

Colin McCahon's work is intrinsically tied to the New Zealand landscape. McCahon had a deep and personal engagement with his environment over the course of his career, and his work, imbued with representational qualities of culture, humanity and mythology, sought to "highlight enduring relationships with the land and its emotional and spiritual weight" (Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2020).

McCahon developed a highly identifiable style of painting that uniquely represented diverse landscapes spanning the length of the North and South Islands of New Zealand. Many of his paintings are stark and minimal, but it is this absence of extraneous detail that sparks interest in his work, and draws a viewer to consider the significance held in each piece along with the animistic spirit inherent in a place. This is illustrated by McCahon's interest in a Māori worldview, particularly those ideas which "see the land not just as geology but as a powerful and sustaining being" (Paton, 2019, p.16).

At times painting from memory, the engagement McCahon sought to portray was "an engagement not just with how places look but with all they suggest: what they mean, how they stir us, why they stay with us" (Paton, 2019, p.12). In a letter to Toss Woollaston, McCahon (1939, as cited in Simpson, 2009) details a specific set of responses he sought to stir in viewers of his painting *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill*:

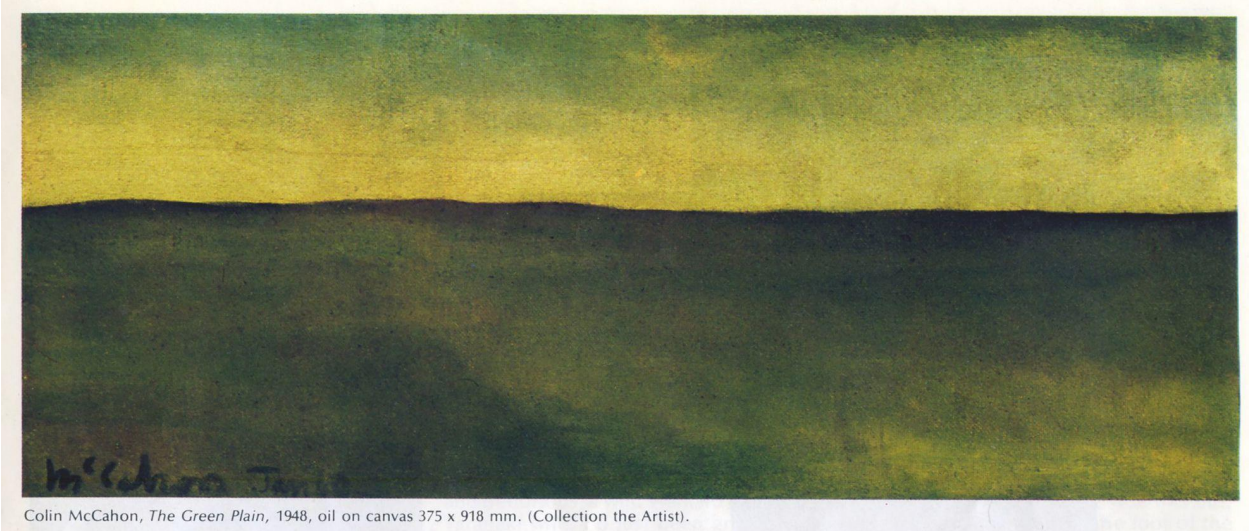
> *I imagined people looking at it, then looking at a landscape & for once really seeing it & being happier for it & then believing in God & the brotherhood of men & the futility of war & the impossibility of people owning & having more right to a piece of air than anyone else* (p. 50)

An early painting of McCahon's, *The Green Plain* (1948), captures the austerity inherent in much of his work, and serves as an example of the way subtle representations of landscape can

often have a profound impact - allowing space for the viewer to project his or her own narrative onto the work. In *The Green Plain* absence makes room for suspense, encouraging us to at once see the past, the present, and a sense of things to come (Paton, 2019, p. 56). McCahon's stripped back landscapes are reflective artifacts that show us how deeply he related to the landscape of New Zealand and they offer us the opportunity to see our own connection.

Figure 6

The Green Plain



Note: McCahon, C. (1948). The green plain [Oil on canvas]. https://mccahonhouse.org.nz/100/wystan-curnow/

Sublime Settings in Cinema

Vigil (1984), filmed in New Zealand and written and directed by Vincent Ward, is a dark, earthy, coming-of-age film that takes place on a remote sheep farm in the Taranaki region. Set against the stark backdrop of dramatic, fog-shrouded hills and cliffs, the film "celebrates nature in its eternal cycle of life and death" (Thomas, 1986, para. 1) through the lens of Toss, a 12-year-old girl living in isolation on the farm with her mother, father and grandfather. Toss' world is upended with the intrusion of a strange man that coincides with her impending transition to womanhood. This film belongs to the canon of uniquely gothic New Zealand cinema, a style of film described by Tim Wong in an interview with Ward as containing "recurrent themes [such as] isolation, the presence of the landscape [and] the provincial gothic'" (as cited in Bisley, 2013, para 64). Jennifer Lawn expands on this concept in the introduction to *Gothic NZ: The darker side of Kiwi culture*, writing "The… domestic gothic recurs persistently in settler representation: the Pakeha

family is stripped to its elemental units and isolated from the revitalising commerce of the wider social world in [such films as] Vincent Ward's *Vigil*" (2006, p. 16).

The film uses a muted colour palette of greens, browns and greys, and this, along with the bleak weather, highlights the oppressiveness of the landscape and the somewhat depressed austerity of the character's existence. Many of the outdoor scenes depict moments of sublimity, particularly those in which the fog creates an immense blanket of cold white void. During such scenes "we lose all sense of depth and scale and strain to make sense of what we're seeing as the elements come together into lovely compositions of figures against a sublime landscape" (Dean, 2018, para. 3).

Figure 7

Still from Vigil

Note: Ward, V. (1984). Vigil [Film still]. https://www.framerated.co.uk/vigil-1984/

There is minimal dialogue throughout, instead the story is often told through the bodily language of the actors and their surrounding environment, with the dramatic setting of the harsh and isolated landscape gaining a life and narrative of its own. The steep, unforgiving hills enveloping the farmhouse not only shape the characters—the mother's quiet yearning, Toss' mystical rituals

and loss of faith, the grandfather's futile attempts to drain the valley and save the farm—but reflect their somewhat troubled psyches and fractured relationships.

The intrinsic ties between the story, the characters and the land itself lends an eerie mysticism that sits outside of the here and now, with "the blasted landscape, the omnipresent gloom of fog and rain, the blurring of reality, magic, fantasy and dream all [contributing] to this sense of timelessness" (Seton, 1997, para. 5).

Watching *Vigil,* it is easy to draw comparisons to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), a loose adaptation of the 1972 science fiction novel *Roadside Picnic*. The film follows the titular character as he guides two companions through a post-industrial environment reclaimed by nature and shrouded in mystery. Known only as 'The Zone', the landscape in this area operates outside of measurable, knowable laws, shifting and changing without warning, sitting outside of standard experiential time, laden with unnamed 'traps', "a place where powerful and mysterious natural and perhaps supernatural forces thrive" (Madson, 2019, para. 46).

Figure 8

Still from Stalker

Note: Tarkovsky, A. (1979). Stalker [Film still].
https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4739-stalker-meaning-and-making

As in *Vigil* the landscape is unfeeling and at times oppressive, shaping the characters' spiritual journey while reflecting their psychological states. As the characters venture into 'the zone' towards 'the room' at the centre of this landscape they are forced to reckon their faith along with their subconscious desires. Throughout this film, themes of spirituality and transcendence are prominent and intrinsically connected to the environment.

Tarkovsky was interested in transcendence: in his book *Sculpting in Time* (1987), Tarkovsky writes "the soul yearns for harmony, and life is full of discordance. This dichotomy is the stimulus for movement, the source at once of our pain and our hope: confirmation of our spiritual depths and potential" (p. 195). In *Stalker*, as in *Vigil*, the environment that is the source of transcendence is so crucial that it becomes a sentient character in its own right. In this depiction of a living environment in which characters engage, rather than observe, the landscape is parallel to those worldviews standing in opposition to the Western nature–culture divide.

In an episode titled *Where to begin with… Tarkovsky* from the BBC Podcast series *The Film Programme*, Lrushka Ivan-Zadeh describes Tarkovsky as an "earthy filmmaker" who hoped his viewers would reach a transcendent state through the sublime imagery in his film. She states that "nature is incredibly important in Tarkovsky's work, in that sort of sense that through nature, and through art, you sort of touch God… or touch the sublime" (Benedict, 2019).

Tarkovsky (1978) had spoken about the current status quo of disconnect between the human experience and the natural world (through the lens of filmmaking):

> *Often we remove nature from films because it seems useless. We exclude it thinking we are the real protagonists. But we are not the protagonists because we are dependent on nature. We are the result of its evolution. I think to neglect nature, from an emotional and artistic point of view, is a crime. Above all, it is stupid, because nature always gives us the sensation of the truth* (as cited in Gianvito, 2006, p. 48)

Conclusion

This essay has sought to address the ways in which a number of artists, across a variety of mediums, have represented landscape, and by extension the human relationship with and connection to the natural environment. Though Western society has mainly cultivated an exploitative relationship with the non-human world, seeing it as ‘other’ and separate from our thinking selves, there are contrasting indigenous worldviews that consider the environment and all it encompasses as a complex web and cosmic whole in which humans are just one part. One way we in the Western world might seek to see ourselves as a part of the whole is through the contemplation of sublime artworks or artworks that convey sublime scenes of nature. Perhaps it will be a gateway to repairing the elemental ties to the land we exist within.

Word count: 4063 words

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